

The Soft Power of Indian Culture

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By Shovana Narayan



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The term 'culture' is an all-encompassing term that includes ideology, language, cuisine, religion, behavior, social habits, music and arts that bring out the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people.

Several essays and commentaries have dwelt on the contribution by the Indian diaspora in countries abroad through dressing and food habits, Sanskritisation, the spread of Hinduism and Buddhist philosophy and tenets especially along the Silk Route, Indian honorifics especially in Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia and of course Bollywood and Indian performing and martial arts.

The power of soft power is not only related to international realms but also to domestic realms as it has the power to change and transform people, groups, habits and local practices.

Ideology

The term '*soft power*' brought into intellectual orbit by Prof. Joseph Nye was a term that implied an ability to exert influence politically, economically, culturally, socially without resorting to the hard power of battles, wars, and coercion. Without waging wars and without forcible conversions, Hinduism and Buddhism spread from India and became a way of life for a large number of nations of South-east Asia and the Far East. The ideological export of Indian ideas of non-violence enriched other cultures through absorption and assimilation.

Because of its location, the ideological export of ideas was first seen in South East Asia. Diana Eck, the Harvard scholar of Hinduism, speaks of India's "*sacred geography*". In her words, India is a "land-linked not by the power of kings and governments, but by the footsteps of pilgrims" and which is embodied in the journeys of Shankaracharya, who in the 8th century AD, traveled all over India setting up centers of pilgrimage in distant corners of the country.

Indian universities of ancient India such as Nalanda, Vikramshila and Taxila attracted students and scholars from across the globe who took with them Indian scholarship and ideas. On Nalanda University, one Chinese account (*as cited by Kosambi*) states that "*Always present were 10,000 monks, including hosts and guests, who studied both the Mahayana teachings and the doctrines of the 18 Himalayan schools as well as worldly books such as the Vedas and other classics. They also studied grammar, medicine, and mathematics*".

Cognitive Power

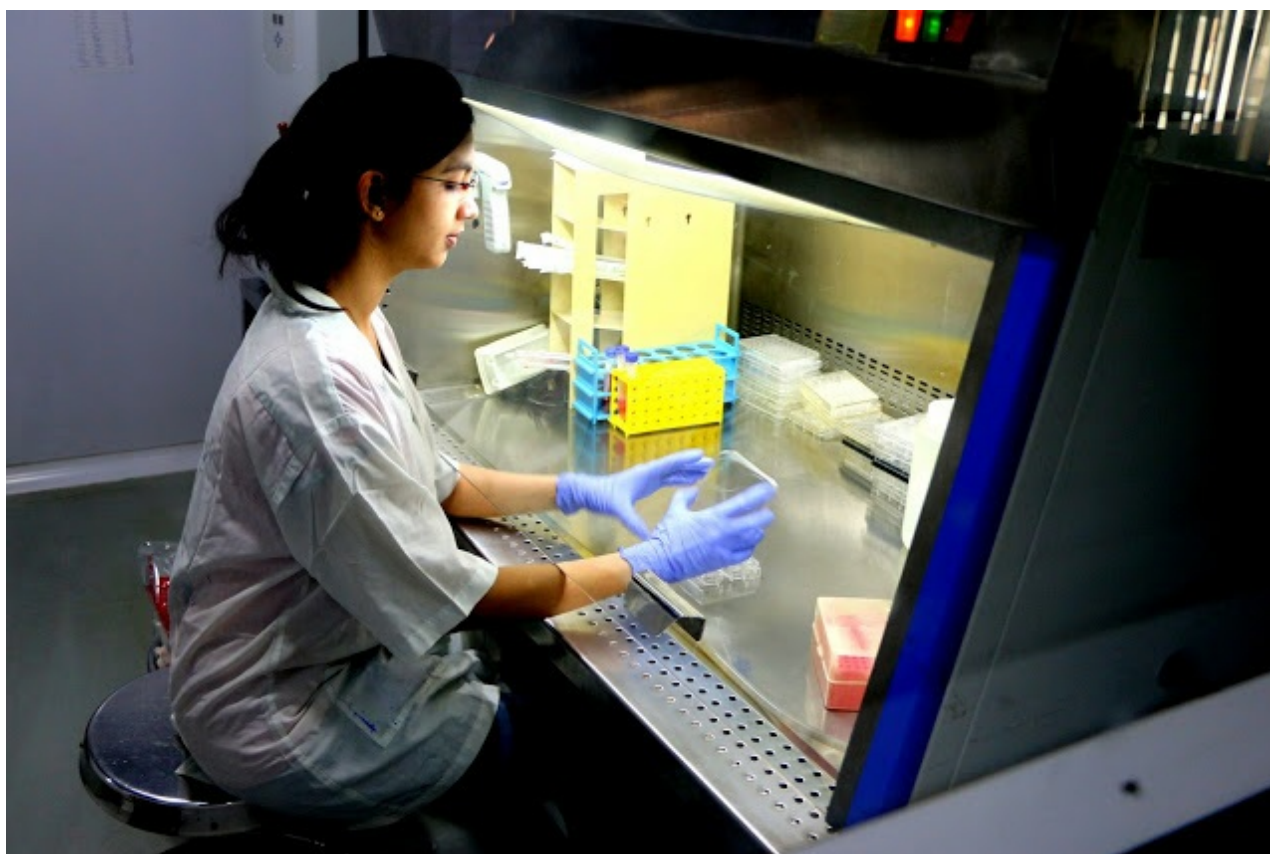


Image Attribute: A research student at one of the laboratories at School of Biological Sciences and Biotechnology, IAR Gandhinagar / Source: IAR Gandhinagar, Flickr, Creative Commons

It was the soft power of scholarship and learning of high standards in India that paved the way for the development of the decimal system and algebra. The numeral system starting from zero with a set of 10 symbols (0 to 9) were first introduced in the Middle East in the 9th century by Arab scholars such as Muhammad ibn Musa Al-Khwarizmi (*in his book called "On the Calculation with Hindu numerals"*) and Al-Kindi (*in his book "On the Use of Hindu Numerals"*). The Hindu Numeral system and the sine functions found their way to Europe from the Middle East sometime in the 12th century. The Arabs also adopted the sine function used by Indian mathematicians, instead of the chords of arc used in Hellenistic mathematics. The Hindu numeral system was based on glyphs that were descendants of the Brahmi system and which later evolved into several typographical variants in the Middle Ages across the world.

Indian scholarship in astronomy was known since very ancient times and later developed as a discipline of *Vedanga* (*associated with the study of the Vedas*) around 1500 BCE. In the 1st century AD, Indian astronomy was taken to China with the expansion of Buddhism in 2nd c BC. The great Hindu astronomer of that era was Lagadha. He was followed by *Aryabhata*, *Brahmagupta*, *Varahimira*, and *many others*. Aryabhata's work, the *Aryabhati*, (5th century) represented the pinnacle of the flowering of Indian astronomy that significantly influenced Muslim astronomy, European astronomy, and Chinese astronomy, among others. As with the Hindu numeral system, Indian astronomy too

reached Europe through the Arabs. The Arab work "*Great Sindhind*" by Muhammad al-Fazari based on the Indian text *Surya Siddhanta* and the works of *Brahmagupta*, was translated into Latin in 1126 that is said to have greatly influenced European astronomy.

In the field of medicine and surgery, *Sushruta* was perhaps one of the first cosmetic surgeons of the world. His epic work *Sushruta Samhita*, is all-inclusive, including its most famous part outlining the technique for repairing and recreating a nose that is known today as reconstructive rhinoplasty. His technique for rhinoplasty featured a free-flap graft and the use of a piece of skin from other parts of the body to graft it on face skin with a small bridge of tissue to correct the look of the person, was nothing but the modern day "*plastic surgery*" and which was widely practiced in 6th century BC in India. *Sushruta Samhita* was first translated by the Arabs around the 8th century after which it traveled to Europe. By 1400, *Sushruta's* techniques were apparently being practiced by surgeons in Italy. But it was in the 18th century during the colonial period that the technique of free-flap graft was rediscovered by Western medicine when the East India Company surgeons, Thomas Cruso and James Findlay, witnessed Indian rhinoplasty procedures at the British Residency in Poona and carried the knowledge back with them. A British surgeon named Joseph Constantine Carpue read about the procedure, practiced it on cadavers for 20 years before performing the operation successfully on a patient in 1814. His subsequent publication popularized the procedure in Europe, and by the 1830s the technique had made it to the United States.

It is this cognitive power where we see *Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs)* contributing to high-level intellectuals that are dotting large conglomerates across the world in leading positions. Leading multinational companies are digging into the Indian talent pool to head their organizations as they are not only intelligent, well qualified and skilled but are also multifaceted, agile and adaptive. They also tend to be more eager to embrace challenges and adapt to new cultures.

In the field of medicine, India has been one of the most important source countries of medical doctors for the advanced countries since the 1960s. According to a 2005 study by Fitzhugh Mullen, India was by far the single largest source of emigrated physicians in the world with about 5% of American physicians and 11% of British physicians. Doctors of Indian origin in the United States of America account for 20% of all International Medical Graduates employed in the US workforce (*study by Fitzhugh Mullen*).

Yoga



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In the 19th century, it was Swami Vivekanand who introduced yoga to the American public, reviving the ancient tradition of Patanjali, which had been almost forgotten. However, the foundations had been laid earlier by the interest of few Western scholars in ancient Indian texts such as the Bhagwadgita that spoke of three streams of yoga. But as a physical culture related to the body and mental fitness, yoga gained ground in the 20th century. It was India's answer to an international movement to revitalize physical culture, which was evident in the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896. The Yogis of the 20th century exported certain elements of yoga that was accelerated by the rise of global media. The Beatles who in 1967, for a short while became devotees of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi brought the spotlight on yoga. But perhaps it is the fast-paced life of late 20th and 21st century aided by technological advancements that brought in a rise in mental, physical and emotional stress, that has made yoga become appealing to people across the world as a befitting answer to their needs.

Even though it may have some religious connotations and as a nationalistic ideology to Indian Hindus, yet for the most part of the world it is taken to be secular physical exercise culture with biomedical health benefits. Of late there has been mushrooming of several gyms and fitness centers in several countries that cater to Hatha Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, and the Hot-Bikram Yoga. Recognizing the worldwide appeal of yoga, on a resolution introduced in the *United Nations (UN)* in 2015, 21st June has been earmarked as International Yoga Day.

Indian Classical Performing Arts Culture-Exotic, alluring, refreshing, spiritually elevating, Indian classical performing arts, initially practiced by wives of ex-patriates, suddenly caught the imagination of one and all with Uday Shankar and his association with Anna Pavlova along with his younger brother, Pt. Ravi Shankar partnering with great violin maestro Yehudi Menuhin. In fact, the free dance style of Uday Shankar that reached into the repository of several classical Indian dance forms, a trend that had been started by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore at his *Shanti Niketan* with RabindraNritya, an amalgamation of Manipuri and Kathak, became a trendsetter in the development of modern contemporary Indian dance. Beatles who became ardent followers of the great sitar wizard, Pt. Ravi Shankar, gave sitar a unique recognition and place in the world's music consciousness.

Indian Films and Indian Diaspora



Image Attribute: Indian film stars Shahrukh Khan and Deepika Padukone / Source: "Chennai Express" Motion Picture, circa 2013

Besides the IITs, the classical performing arts and yoga, another important player in the world of India's soft power is the Indian film industry. In an increasingly globalized world, identity has become a key issue. Technological advancements like satellite, internet, TV, all forms of electronic media especially Bollywood, have become vehicles for the Indian diaspora to re-root their identity and stay connected with their motherland.

According to the 2005 census, the Indian population around the world was estimated to be around 25 million. The number of Indian immigrants in the US increased from 0.2

million in 1980 to 1.68 million in 2000 and to about 3 million in 2005. Similarly, in other parts of the globe, the number of Indian diasporas has increased tremendously. Also, the economic status of the second generations of Indian origin has improved drastically. In addition, are the highly educated and well-placed expatriates who too have an innate thirst to be connected with their motherland. All these have paved the way for the increasing influence of Bollywood among the Indian diaspora hungering to be part of their culture. In most Bollywood films from the late 1980s, the presentation of an amalgamated lifestyle that is Indian yet reflects western style of dressing, behaviour and mannerism, language, music and dances that are transcultural and hybrid in nature, find resonance in the hearts and minds of most of the diaspora who themselves are hung between two cultures – culture of country of their origin and culture of the host/ adopted country. It is no wonder that several schools of Bollywood dances have sprung up wherever the Indian immigrants are in sizeable numbers. Their inclination has influenced screening of Bollywood films on TV channels, Netflix, and even in some cinema theatres. According to Parth Vohra, *“Revenue earned by Indian movies overseas nearly tripled in 2017, with box office collections outside of India growing to \$367 million”*.

Several musical drama films of Hollywood of yesteryears that had given way to realism, seem to be now also returning to the portrayal of musical drama films. Deccan Herald in one of their articles seems to suggest that imperceptible influence of the alluring musical dramas of Bollywood can be seen in terms of *“music, choreography and various new cinematic methods in Hollywood. This can be seen in shows like “High School: The Musical”, the film version of Les Miserables and other similar films and TV shows that include sudden song and dance numbers with considerable dance choreography”*.

Challenges of Soft Power

The tentacles of soft power are varied and multi-pronged encompassing positive and negative fallouts. Recently it has also been used to change social and political opinions that have led to changes in rules and laws.

One of the most powerful tools of setting mindsets and stereotypes is the media and its capacity for representation. Personal narratives and individual experiences are also potent vehicles of soft power as they either add or negate the mindset created by the media.

Tourism Industry



Image Attribute: The file photo of foreign tourists in Jaipur, Rajasthan / Source: Wikimedia

While an independent and strong media is necessary and is a powerful corrective factor, yet this very tool may adversely affect a country's image. The report of rapes and bride burning have led to a mindset that India is a country of rapes and has affected the tourism industry. This was no different to the post-1857 revolt where the media and English literature of the late 19th and 20th centuries, portrayed Indians as '*dark-skinned rapists*' and from whom '*English female chastity*' had to be protected and which had a significant influence on the policies of the British Raj. It is but another matter that such portrayals were countered and challenged by novels such as E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*, as also Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's article "India's Women: The Mixed Truth" after the December 2012 gang rape. Sen has given the statistics that as in 2010, "*rapes in India were 1.8 per 100,000 compared to 27.3 in the US, 28.8 in the UK, 63.5 in Sweden and 120 in South Africa*", even after taking into account five or ten times the under-reported figures of rape cases in India. Many have argued that it is the Indian media which gives such prominence to negative news, which in turn is picked up by Western media. In fact, the "negative portrayal" of a country to pick up the "*exception*" stories and ignore other positive development news, is a worldwide phenomenon that adversely affects the image of a particular country.

Migration



Image Attribute: A file photo of Indian Students in Canada / Source: Youtube screengrab

Fear of immigrants are caused by stereotype mind-sets fuelled by sensational stories that lead to images about a country and its people. Says Divya Bhargava that “*Stereotypes occur when individuals are classified by others as having something in common because they are members of a particular group or category of people*”.

The perception that immigrants are unable or non-willing to assimilate because of cultural gaps especially towards women and lifestyle; that they are diseased and have poor hygienic habits; that they resort to crime; that they affect local wages as they are willing to work at very low wages and in substandard conditions adversely affecting job prospects for the locals; that undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes and thereby become a burden to the social security system, are some of the fears in the minds of the host population. Local fears adversely affect the process of acculturation of immigrants making them more prone to mistreatment and crime, while adding to constraints on their ability to productively contribute. Unfortunately, recent events have affirmed such fears yet there are enough examples of just the reverse where the immigrants have proved a boon and have been catalysts in the development of the host country.

The Behavior of the Diaspora

Against such fears, it is the hard work and loyalty to the adopted country that has made immigrants from India, despite the adverse Komagata Maru and such other similar experiences, to create a niche for themselves and become accepted and important members of the society of the host countries. The academic and economic achievements along with their acculturation, have made them ‘*model minorities*’ in some countries.

Economic Relations

In matters of trade relations, stereotypes, once again fuelled by the powerful media, play a significant role. While the media may highlight difficulties with respect to the extent of ease in starting a business, getting permits and credits, registering property, protecting Investors and enforcing contracts, government policies related to foreign direct investment, changing of laws and rules, and tax issues, it is also the individual experiences of firms and individuals relating to other issues in addition to the ones highlighted by the media such as adhering or changing of pricing midway into a project, undercutting in terms of pricing, concept of time, of performance or non-performance in terms of adhering to delivery dates and targets and in quality control, work culture, labour culture and related issues etc that affect the image of a country and of doing business with that particular country.

Change in Demography

Increase in the number of a specified community or a group of people is a potent soft power of seeping into the cultural fabric of the host country or host region. With increase in the numbers of immigrants, taking advantage of the liberal laws of the host region/ country regarding pressing of preservation of their cultural identity in terms of dressing habits, language, religion and attitudes towards women, that demand more and more public space, virtually displacing/ replacing the original culture of the host country/region, can lead to and have led to tensions. The more the immigrants grow in numbers, the more their inability or unwillingness to assimilate into the culture of the host country/ region surfaces. In such a situation, it is personal narratives and experiences that lead to a change of rules and regulations affecting several communities either favorably or adversely.

The Soft Power of Social Media



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Nye while stating that *'the best propaganda was no propaganda'*, has simultaneously cautioned on the issue of credibility. The rise of social media, an electronic tool comprising of several diverse elements and methodology ranging from blogs, business networks, social networks, videos and photo sharing, social bookmarking, and virtual worlds, have brought information to the hands of most people and has been changing the dynamics of soft power across the globe. Hand-in-hand is the rise of fake news, whose power is immense as it is intricately entwined with *"online partisan media, both responding and setting its issue agenda"* say Vargo, Guo and Amazeen in their paper *"The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016"*. A key vehicle for rapid transportation and communication of fake news is social media. In such a scenario, a sane voice with checked out facts are no match for shrill rhetoric of fake news that becomes lethal agents of *'negative soft power'* and *'propaganda'* which itself is a form of soft power.

Prof. Tawana Kupe, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Pretoria, opines that *"Fake news is a set of, at worst, manufactured or concocted facts that are a perversion of reality"*. He also says that its phenomenal rise can be attributed to *"the loss of confidence in public institutions, including media institutions and the profession of journalism. Fakery has risen to fill the vacuum, driven by individuals and political organizations who position themselves as messiahs with instant solutions to multiple social crises"*. Damien Spry (Article *"Soft Power takes a sharp turn"* in *The Strategist*, 30th Jan 2018) opines that *"Social media*

campaigns present two wicked dilemmas. First, their massive quantities of content and speed-of-light transmission networks probably make them unstoppable. And second, even when they're identified, discredited and exposed as fraudulent, they remain sufficiently potent to fool enough of the people enough of the time."

Replacement of Traditional Local Cultures and Rituals by Bollywood

Within India, the soft power of Bollywood has brought about a transformation in regional cultural traditions. This has been most visible in weddings. Post the great box office success of *"Hum Apke Hain Kaun"*, wedding customs and rituals in various states and communities have yielded to Bollywood style extravaganza weddings with choreographed music and dance pre-wedding festivities, obliterating traditional local customs and rituals. Similarly, the modest *Hartalika Teej* and *Karva Chauth* celebrations that were basically in-house family celebrations are slowly yielding to Bollywood style community *Karva Chauth* celebration.

Conclusion

The power of culture cannot be divorced from the power of politics and the economy. The growing presence of Indians in cyberspace is phenomenal with far-reaching impact. With the growing number of the Indian diaspora, not only Bollywood, traditional Indian music and dance, India's cognitive power but also Indian cuisine with its distinctive spices, has become quite a popular world over, evident in the mushrooming of Indian restaurants. Similarly, cricket diplomacy has been resorted to at suitable times. Immigrants have come to play major roles in the political spheres of different countries. The positive effect of soft power also comes with its downside such as erosion of individuality, perpetration of hegemonic ideas, of obliteration of local customs giving way to the universalization of practices. The plethora of information puts a strain on the judicious and considered reasoning of individuals many of whom fall prey to fake news. Several sources give rise to perceptual and conceptual information, of which the mass media inclusive of social media is the main channel.

Time is an important factor in determining the importance and outcome of soft power. It is well-known that that soft power requires a long time, often decades, for any tangible influence to be felt and in building meaningful economic and political ties. In today's world, impatient to achieve its goals and targets, it is 'smart power, a judicious combination of soft and hard power that several countries are resorting to. Simultaneously, 'sharp power' a new term coined in the NED report that is secretive, manipulative and deceitful, is increasingly surfacing in several parts of the world including India in which strengths of nations become their weakness as liberal institutions (*such as free speech, independent media, and electoral democracy*) get to be exploited. Dimensions of soft power are increasing at a fast pace.

About the Author:

Padmashree Shovana Narayan is a world-renowned Indian Kathak dancer. She had a dual career, in parallel, as a Kathak artist and a career officer with Indian Audit and Accounts Service (1975 IA&AS Officer), retired in 2010.

Narayan studied at Miranda House in Delhi, India, graduating with a master's degree in Physics in 1972. She completed M.Phil in Defence and Strategic Studies from the University of Madras in 2008 and M.Phil in Social Sciences from Punjab University in 2001.

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